

6. Ibid., 81.
7. Ibid. The quote by Lippard is from "The Art Worker's Coalition," in *Idea Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1973).
8. Ramsden, 81.
9. Ian Burn, "The 1960s: Crisis and Aftermath," *Art & Text*. 1 (Autumn 1981), rep. in Burn, *Dialogue: Writings in Art History* (North Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991), 105.
10. Ramsden, 82.
11. Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 324.
12. Hemingway is singled out by Bryan-Wilson for his excellent history of the engagement between artists and the American Communist Party; see Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).
13. See Ian Burn, "Pricing Works of Art," *The Fox* 1 (1975): 53–59; and Adrian Piper, "A Proposal for the Pricing of Works of Art," *The Fox* 2 (1975): 48–49.

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Alzo David-West North Korean Art: Some Basic Ground

Jane Portal. *Art under Control in North Korea*. London: Reaktion Books, dist. University of Chicago Press, 2005. 192 pp., 72 color ills., 63 b/w. \$35 paper

David Heather and Koen De Ceuster. *North Korean Posters*. New York: Prestel, 2008. 288 pp., 252 color ills. \$25 paper

North Korean art is a generally and surprisingly neglected area of study in English-language scholarship on East Asian art and art history. With different areas of focus, scope, and methods of presentation, two recent publications that attempt to address the paucity of serious academic research are Jane Portal's *Art under Control in North Korea* and David Heather and Koen De Ceuster's *North Korean Posters*.

Portal, former head of the Chinese and Korean sections at the British Museum in London, authored *Art under Control in North Korea* after two visits to North Korea in 2001 and 2002, and she describes the book as "just a beginning" (181). The back cover states that the work is "the first publication in the West to explore the role of art in one of the world's most isolated nations." Since North Korean art has been the subject of an occasional academic essay, book chapter, and website (e.g., Frank Hoffman's "North Korean Artists" at koreaweb.ws/nkart/xz1.html), it would be more accurate to describe *Art under Control in North Korea* as the first book in English that attempts a broad exploration of visual art under the Pyongyang regime. There are six chapters. The first half places North Korean art in the ancient monumental tradition (Roman and Chinese) and the totalitarian tradition (fascism, Nazism, Stalinism, and Maoism), a connection that is suggested but insufficiently argued, and provides a historical and political overview of the regime and society. The latter half focuses on the uses of art in the personality cult of the late leader Kim Il Sung, the manipulation of archeology to reshape history, and the production and consumption of art under the Juche (independent stand or spirit of self-reliance) doctrine.

Art under Control in North Korea is written in

an accessible and descriptive style. The final chapter, for example, simply and synoptically describes the theory of Juche realism, the organization and training of artists, the chronology of North Korean art, and some of the different art forms in North Korea. Portal organizes the latter as performing arts; town and country planning; architecture, monuments, and sculptures; underground station art; calligraphy; ink painting; oil painting; printmaking, posters, stamps, and coins; crafts; and ceramics. Several serious shortcomings, however, attend the synoptic approach Portal uses. For instance, there is no introduction in the book to contextualize the material of presentation; chapter 1, "Art for the State," opens with a completely misapplied epigraph on socialist realism from the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, who used the phrase "socialist realism" but had his own unique, experimentalist interpretation of the doctrine; Portal does not elaborate on the point that the Soviet Union and China influenced the North Korean version of socialist realism; the impact of Japanese colonial fascism on the art of the postcolonial country is not examined; and some of the art forms discussed in the last chapter, for example, posters, are dealt with in a few passing sentences.

On the matter of Brecht, since Portal deals with North Korean art, it would make more sense to frame her subject matter with a quote from Kim Il Sung or his son and successor, Kim Jong Il, who was directly involved in arts administration, as well as film and theater direction, in the 1960s and 1970s. Portal's Brecht quote reads, "Realist art is the art of battle: it battles against false views of reality and impulses which subvert man's real interests. It makes correct views possible and reinforces productive impulses" (7). This is the first of ten theses on socialist realism from Brecht's 1953–54 notebooks. The theses do not mention party or state, arguing instead that socialist realism is about the artist and an attitude to the world (see Berel Lang and Forrest Williams, *Marxism and Art: Writings in Aesthetics and Criticism* [New York: David McKay, 1972], 226–27). Such a perspective is not found in the North Korean understanding of socialist realism.

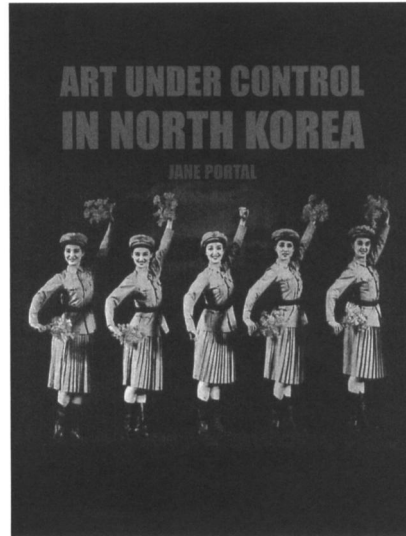
Diametrically opposed to Brecht is Kim Jong Il's official treatise *On Fine Art* (1991), a work that adopts the socialist realism of Zhdanovism—a monolithic, nationalistic,

and puritanical cultural policy named after Stalin's cultural czar Andrei Zhdanov—which dominated Soviet art and letters from 1934 to 1956. Kim declares, "Our Party has set forth the policy of establishing *Juche* in fine art, and has ensured the full implementation of this policy in all spheres of artistic creation."¹ He adds, "The fundamental principle of *Juche* realism is to be national in form and socialist in content." National form is defined as "what is liked by the people of a given country and suits their sentiments and tastes" and socialist content as "smashing the old, creating the new and waging a struggle to achieve the independence of the masses" (35). Kim says *Juche* realism embodies the state *Juche* ideology, as well as "Party spirit, working-class spirit and popular spirit" (the original Russian terms are *partiinost'*, *klassovost'*, and *narodnost'*), and creates model "positive heroes" (36). These are old Soviet Stalinist formulas.

Zhdanovism was able to take root in North Korea for several reasons: After the joint US-Soviet liberation, occupation, and division of Korea at the end of the Second World War, the northern state was constructed under the Soviet Army from 1945 to 1948, the peak of Zhdanovism (1947 to 1950). During that period, establishment of the General Federation of Unions of Literature and Arts of Korea in 1946 made socialist realism the official creative method. Moreover, the Soviet-appointed leader Kim Il Sung, an officer in the Soviet Army from 1941 to 1945, admired Stalin and Zhdanov and embraced their idea of artists as "engineers of the human soul." There was also a policy to assimilate and learn from the advanced culture and experience of the Soviet Union. Finally, the Stalinist-Zhdanovist demands for a politically subordinated and tendentious art found resonance in a society with a five-hundred-year-old Neo-Confucian tradition of didactic and moral art.

Strangely, the historical section in *Art under Control in North Korea* does not discuss North Korean Zhdanovism. Nor is there documentation of the struggle the national-Stalinist Pyongyang regime waged against so-called subjectivism, formalism, and naturalism and the "art-for-art's-sake doctrine," modern Western artistic tendencies introduced to Korea from Japan during the colonial period (1910–45). Also overlooked by

Portal is the Russian- and Japanese-influenced proletarian art movement in Korea in the mid-1920s to mid-1930s, a tradition North Korea would appropriate. In addition, the Chinese Maoist influence that Portal only indicates (13, 29, and 124) began with Kim's membership in the Chinese Communist



Party (CCP) and partisanship in the CCP anticolonial, anti-Japanese, antifascist guerrilla struggle in Manchuria from 1931 to 1941. Kim's Chinese connection subsequently led to his deployment of North Korean soldiers in the Chinese Civil War (1945–50). There was reciprocal Chinese participation in the Korean War (1950–53) and a five-year Chinese postwar occupation of North Korea. Kim also sided with Mao against Soviet "de-Stalinization" (initiated in 1953 and formalized in 1956), a position that extended to the Sino-Soviet split of 1961.

Concerning Kim Il Sung and art policy, it should be emphasized that although the Soviet Army selected him in 1946 and his hagiographer Han Sörya designated him the "sun of the nation" (a Stalinist and Hirohitoist adulation) in that year, Kim did not mastermind the artistic scene in the formative 1940s and 1950s. North Korean art was born not through Kim's personal political directives, but through the arts and cultural policy of the Soviet military administration; the absorption of colonial-era artists of collaborationist, localist, and proletarianist persuasions; and the domestic cultural and political organs with which these individuals were associated. That interaction

created a hybrid art culture that combined Soviet, Japanese-Western, and Korean conventions. The implantation of Zhdanovism, however, made partisan and politically correct realism the norm.

After the Korean War, several landmark events further affected the development of North Korean art. These were Kim's anti-Soviet reformism *Juche* speech of 1955—stressing North Korean national interests, Korean history and culture, and ethnic-racial pride—and his initiation of the great purge of 1956 to 1960 and the second purge of 1966 to 1968. Kim, in consequence, became an all-powerful leader, and the anti-Japanese guerrilla tradition in state legend and art was established to justify his rule. Portal does not highlight that Kim, since 1946, spoke intermittently on the arts. She only states that *Juche* art began in 1966, when Kim delivered his speech "Let Us Develop Revolutionary Fine Arts," praising the Ninth National Exhibition. That text invokes several criteria of state-approved visual art, such as party guidance, establishing *Juche*, educational value, emotion, happiness, lifelikeness, representationalism, vividness, mass orientation, national traditions, indigenous and indigenized forms, and systematic training under the state.

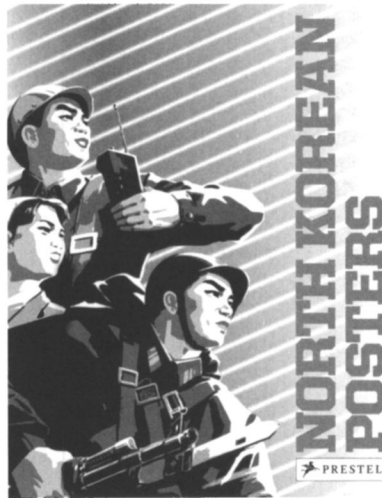
Portal refers to the 1970s as the *Juche* age and says *Juche* art continued into the 1980s. She points out that "*Juche* theory" was consolidated in the 1990s with the "collapse of Communism in East Europe" and "China's Open Door policy" (131–32). Somehow, the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, the greatest economic benefactor of North Korea, is overlooked. Without actually making a close analysis of North Korean artworks, Portal ends her chronology in 1999 and says, "North Korean art was as unchanged as the economy" (134, emphasis added), which is simply wrong and contradicts her earlier point that "in 1989, the Soviet bloc collapsed, resulting in a great reduction in trade and aid, which seriously undermined the North's economy" (69). The North Korean economy was collapsing in the 1980s; central planning broke down in the 1990s; the country descended into a crisis; markets began to rise rapidly; and art responded to new policy initiatives. Concluding with an unusually short paragraph, Portal appraises North Korean artists as highly skilled, but adds that their subject

matter is restricted by the state. She says the country today is “still somewhat stuck in a time warp,” but things are now “beginning to change,” and opening up to the outside world portends a “great effect” on art production in forthcoming decades (169). These observations unfortunately lend themselves to the idea that North Korea has been a static society. Portal reinforces that misconception by neglecting the subject of advertising design, which exists in the country, and *Songun* (military-first) art, which took off in 2000 after the initiation of Kim Jong Il’s 1998 *Songun* policy during the great famine of 1996–99. *Songun*, to be sure, is not mentioned in the book.

While one *Songun* poster with overt reference to the term is reproduced, the non-Korean speaker would never know because Portal does not translate a line of text that reads “Military-First Revolutionary Leadership” (63). In the same poster, the main slogan is presented as “Let’s Build a Strong Native Land,” though the object is actually “Great Prosperous Powerful Country.” Another *Songun* poster comes with the mistranslated slogan “The Army Is the Sacred Duty of the People,” when it actually says “Reinforcement Is the Sacred Duty of Citizens!” (75). The interpretative effect of the mistranslation is that one may believe the poster is about enlisting in the armed services, which it is not. Moreover, by actually saying “citizens” instead of “people,” the slogan is stressing legal membership in the North Korean polity, civic and moral responsibilities in that community, and the distinction between civilians and soldiers. The all-male image in the poster depicts a smiling citizen centered among six cheerful soldiers and handing out fruit from a box with a label that says “support goods” (*wŏnho mulja*). Similarly, another mistranslation appears in the title of a 1996 woodcut print as “The Great Leader Is Our Father” (98), when the subject is “The General” (*changgunnim*).

Briefly, changes in *Songun* art manifest in more military themes and a stronger military ethos, but not all works depict soldiers or military campaigns. There are also scenes of urban and country life and a genre of landscape painting. Stylistically, the paintings are limited. The general style does, however, bear similarities to nineteenth-century realism, some works employing Impressionist

techniques, others using blended color, and others being contemporary color adaptations of Korean ink painting (*Chosŏnhwa*). But the subjects portrayed tend to be rendered in idealized or romanticized form. Not insignificantly, art production in the *Songun* era is no longer confined to traditional art mediums.



The early 2000s, for one, introduced digital imaging. Computer-aided dioramas, embroidery, paintings, posters, and serial art are some of the newer developments in the North Korean art world, which involves several state-funded studios with local branches across the country. There is even a Korean People’s Army Studio. These studios operate in coordination with the Korean Artists Union (*Chosŏn misulga tongmaeng*, founded 1961), a section of the General Federation of Unions of Literature and Arts of Korea (*Chosŏn munhak yesul ch’ongdongmaeng*, founded 1946). Portal identifies both organizations, though in nonofficial translation, and mistakenly uses “culture” (*munhwa*) in place of “literature” (*munhak*) in the second name. She does not refer to the Korean People’s Army Studio, but the Koryo Art Studio, Mansudae Art Studio, Songhwa Art Studio, and “other art studios” appear in her discussion. These organizations occupy an important place in North Korean society and cultural production.

Art under Control in North Korea is illustrated with 135 black-and-white and color reproductions of paintings, posters, statuary, and other artworks. Artist names, dates, dimensions, and media are provided, with some exceptions. The publication, which falls

short of being authoritative, stands as a general reference to official North Korean art culture before the military-first era.

Heather and De Ceuster’s *North Korean Posters* is not a study of graphic design, but a full-color catalogue of 252 propaganda posters. Chapters are arranged thematically; poster slogans are translated into English and German; and ten posters come with comments. The collection is prefaced and introduced with two short essays by the authors, who are a British art collector and an assistant professor of Korean history at Leiden University in the Netherlands. Heather briefly explains how he came to collect North Korean posters, and De Ceuster concisely discusses in “Banners, Bayonets, and Basketball” (though there is nothing about sports in the essay) the historical, ideological, political, and compositional contexts in which the posters are produced, with special attention to the “age of Army First politics.” That phrase is based on an official North Korean translation of *Songun* that has declined in use since 2006 in favor of the transliterated term.

The second essay notes that North Korean art follows Soviet socialist realist precedent, but has its own historical and cultural peculiarities. The point is generally correct, yet De Ceuster’s claim that “North Korean art is far more than a mere copy of Soviet socialist realism,” which he justifies by paraphrasing Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, is an ahistorical overstatement (11, emphasis added). The Stalinist Soviet Union, after all, sent thousands of artists, lecturers, and performers to Soviet Army-occupied northern Korea in the late 1940s. Soviet film, literature, and manuals also had wide distribution in translation. These decisive culture exposures are an integral part of North Korean art history, and even though official North Korean historiography has deemphasized or written out the role of the Soviet Union, inheritances remain in North Korean art culture.

North Korean posters in particular evince remarkably obvious borrowings in composition, heroic iconography, and layout from Soviet Stalinist posters. There is, for example, the North Korean poster “Let Us Take Revenge a Thousand Times on the US Imperialist Wolves!” (127), which is modeled on the 1943 Soviet poster “Vengeance for the Grief of the People!” by Viktor

Semenovich Ivanov. Likewise, “In Agricultural Production, Let Us Take Hold of and Go Forth with a High Yield in the Seed Revolution!” (28; reviewer’s translation) closely imitates the 1986 Soviet Poster “Increase Scientific Experience, Create a Tremendous Yield!” by V. V. Sachkov. While North Korean posters owe a great debt to Soviet graphic design, one can see Maoist influence in the images of fists and hammers, fetishization of the gun, the soldier leading the masses, book wielders, Lilliputian enemies, and impalings. Where North Korean posters differ from Soviet and Maoist models is in the use of indigenous icons and references, limited color palette, use of color contrast, application of ink painting techniques (e.g., bold outlines for figures), and more stylization, structural rigidity, and formulaism.

Altogether, the posters in the Heather and De Ceuster collection cover a range of topics—agriculture, children, conservation, environment, export, health, ideology, imperialism, industry, military, politics, reunification, senior citizens, sports, technology, war, and women—but a substantial portion of the selection is of a militaristic and defensive character, which the authors may have considered more interesting or more marketable. Besides that, none of the posters includes depictions of Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il. Heather’s preface does not explain this absence. De Ceuster’s essay, in contrast, says the leaders never appear in posters, except in a “sublimated way” through their names, associated flowers, and titles. One such title in a poster is “fatherly general” (*abŏji changgunnim*). While De Ceuster’s explanation applies to most North Korean posters, there are rare but special cases when the Kims have been depicted. Predominantly, though, North Korean visual arts culture gives attention to its great leaders in paintings, murals, and sculpture, which are more enduring art forms than the transient and momentary medium of the poster.

Curiously, artists, dates, media, and the “most prestigious” art studio where the works in *North Korean Posters* were purchased are unmentioned. Though the posters are undated, internal references suggest that they are from 1953 to 2007, and the pieces were likely obtained from the Mansudae Art Studio in Pyongyang. Examining the collection, one observes that styles and techniques

evolve gradually and that it is possible to characterize changes over half a century. Some older posters stand out for their poorer print quality and draftsmanship, with others also lacking bold flat colors and high-contrast effects (e.g., 71, 72, 129, 166, and 190). Notably, the technical sophistication of North Korean graphic designers evinces growth, but clumsy design still appears. One example is the more recent poster “Everyone, Let Us Become Experts in Swimming!” (238, reviewer’s translation), which features two women and a man in profile in successive diving positions. The forms are stiff and faces expressionless; there is no sense of motion; and the figures are diminished by a mass of blue representing a pool.

As for typography, it is conservative and unremarkable. The convention has been to follow Stalin-era design practice: a horizontal bar of bold sans-serif type, punctuated with an exclamation mark, at the bottom of the poster, either superimposed over the image, below it, or in some combination thereof. Posters do integrate image and text and make use of angles, italics, and different type families. But the elements are constrained.

One should note some inaccuracies in slogan translation throughout *North Korean Posters*. At stake in translation is the complex task of being faithful to the meanings and intentions of words in their original cultural, linguistic, and political contexts. No translation is perfect, but mistranslations are misleading. For instance, the main text of a poster with caricatures of a Japanese and an American soldier appears as “Exactly the same guys!” when the last word in Korean means “bastards” (*nomdul*) (118). Another slogan is translated as “Just as it began, the revolution advances and is victorious through the barrel of a gun,” though it should read “Revolution Is Pioneered through the Barrel of a Gun and Advances to Victory through the Barrel of a Gun!” (195). Elsewhere, in a nonposter reference, the three anthropocentric principles of *Juche*—independence, creativity, and consciousness—are introduced to the reader as “autonomy, creativity, and conscience” (9), which means something else.

De Ceuster, who is not a North Korean studies specialist or historian of Korean art, also describes authoritarian, conservative, and national-Stalinist North Korea as a “revo-

lutionary system” and refers to the “power of the appeal” and the “impact of the appeal” of its posters (9, 13). But how are the last two claims known, and are the posters really powerful and appealing to regular North Koreans, whose views outsiders are not permitted to access? Without addressing such questions, De Ceuster brings to mind the romantic gaze of the American and European middle-class “Left” toward Chinese and Cuban posters in the 1960s and 1970s. Regarding art terms and genres, there is quite a bit of confusion. The applied art of the poster is collapsed into the “fine arts tradition” (12); poster designers are referred to as “poster painters” (12); poster illustrations are denoted with the word “painting” (13); type is called “font” (13); archetypes are termed “prototypes” (15); and recurring figures are called a “recurrent template” (15).

Here, it should be said that the Korean word *misul* means either “art” or “fine art” and can include applied art as well as handicraft. The original Chinese characters *mi/měi* and *sul/shù* mean “beautiful” and “technique/method.” Although North Korean sources in translation use the term “fine art,” that is a misnomer. Art, in the North Korean sense, is not aesthetic art, for pleasure and contemplation, but nationalist allegory, and serves educational, ideological, moral, and political purposes. Artists are credited for their work, and some artists may be emotionally invested. Still, the principle is that art must serve the state and society and that its meaning and message not be obscured by experimentalism and personal moods. Not surprisingly, abstract art, which was never as strong a presence as academic realism in the colonial period, is frowned upon in North Korea. That sentiment is in accordance with Kim Il Sung’s 1951 dictum “abstraction means death in art.” Correspondingly, Kim Jong Il has associated abstraction with mental and cultural deterioration.

Related to the issue of North Korean nationalist allegory is the problem of poster analysis and interpretation in *North Korean Posters*. De Ceuster says, “North Korea’s unwavering stance on national autonomy turns into a pillar of international solidarity, peace and friendship and a principal ally for all national liberation movements” (17). The statement is made regarding the poster “Let Us Firmly Uphold the Position of the Anti-Imperialist Independent Stand” (99, review-

er's translation). This poster depicts three hands—one Asian, one African, and one Caucasian—carrying a flaming, golden torch, the mouth of which has the inscription “Independence, Peace, Friendship” (untranslated in the catalogue), that is set against a blue Earth with doves in flight. Since the poster text is in Korean letters (Hangul), it is not meant for an international audience, nor is it about political solidarity with foreign liberationist movements. North Koreans know there are different people in the world. The political and ideological function of the poster iconography serves to manipulate that knowledge to glorify and promote faith in the North Korean regime.

This reading is supported by the fact that the image of the torch, a common motif in North Korea, has at least six major symbolic meanings. They are (1) the “torch of Pochonbo” for Kim Il Sung’s 1937 guerrilla raid on the Japanese-governed colonial Korean town of Pochonbo; (2) the “torch of Kangson” for the rapid industrialization and forced collectivization Chollima movement after the Korean War; (3) the “torch of Juche” for the victory of Kim Il Sung’s independent stand and self-reliance ideology; (4) the “torch of Songgang” for Kim Jong Il’s leadership during the economic and production crisis of the 1990s; (5) the “torch of Ranam” for Kim Jong Il’s military-first ideology, defense of the leader, and devotion to the Workers’ Party of Korea; and (6) the torch for opening the gate to a “great prosperous powerful country” (*kangsŏng taeguk*) in 2012, the centenary of Kim Il Sung. Since the torch in the poster carries the words “Independence, Peace, Friendship,” Kim Il Sung’s foreign policy line, it is a variation of the “torch of Juche” that is depicted. The meaning of the poster is thus interpretable as—“All peoples of the world, except for imperialists, admire and support Kim Il Sung’s Juche foreign policy and North Korea.”

Other posters of obeisant foreigners honoring North Korea are “Socialism Must Be Victorious!” and “A Lighthouse for the Peoples of the World Aiming for Independence!” (202 and 203, reviewer’s translations). The first poster features a globe hovering over three open hands of different colors. North Korea is at the center, and a banner reads “Kim Jong Il” and “Socialism Is a Science” (untranslated in the catalogue).

The latter phrase is the title of a long essay Kim wrote in 1994 in response to the North Korean economic and ideological crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern European bloc countries. His work calls Marxism an inferior theory, disassociates North Korea from it, and celebrates Kim Il Sung’s Juche ideology. As for the second poster, it depicts a mass of ecstatic peoples of different nationalities in the foreground; a section of the Juche Tower, four times the size of the human forms, in the middle ground; and a globe in the background. Significantly, the flame of Juche covers the landmass that was once the Soviet Union. Superimposed over the image is “Socialism Is a Science.” Both posters are declarations of national solipsism (to use Bruce Cumings’s phrase), suggesting that North Korea is the hope and envy of the world and giving the North Korean people a reason to support the nationalist regime.

Despite its limitations as a catalogue, *North Korean Posters* is a valuable showcase of state-sanctioned graphic design “originally meant for a domestic audience” (19). While the visual narratives of the collection are not reflective of North Korea proper, but its ideological image, they document how policy is conveyed through applied art.

Art under Control in North Korea and *North Korean Posters* are initiatory steps toward filling a gap in knowledge about the art culture, history, and practice of North Korea. Portal’s exploration and Heather and De Ceuster’s collection contextualize their subjects within the frame of “art for the state” and “propaganda art,” providing commentary and material that render some basic ground for more developed research and analysis to come.

I. Kim Jong Il, *On Fine Art* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d.), 1.

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